

March 2021

The Tennessee Comptroller’s Office of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) has completed a comprehensive review of student attendance in Tennessee, including issues of chronic absenteeism and truancy. Chronic absenteeism includes all absences, *excused* and *unexcused*. A Tennessee student is chronically absent if he or she misses 10 percent or more of instructional days (typically 18 days absent). Truancy includes unexcused absences only and may have legal consequences. A Tennessee student is truant if he or she accrues five unexcused absences. All research reflects policies and procedures in place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

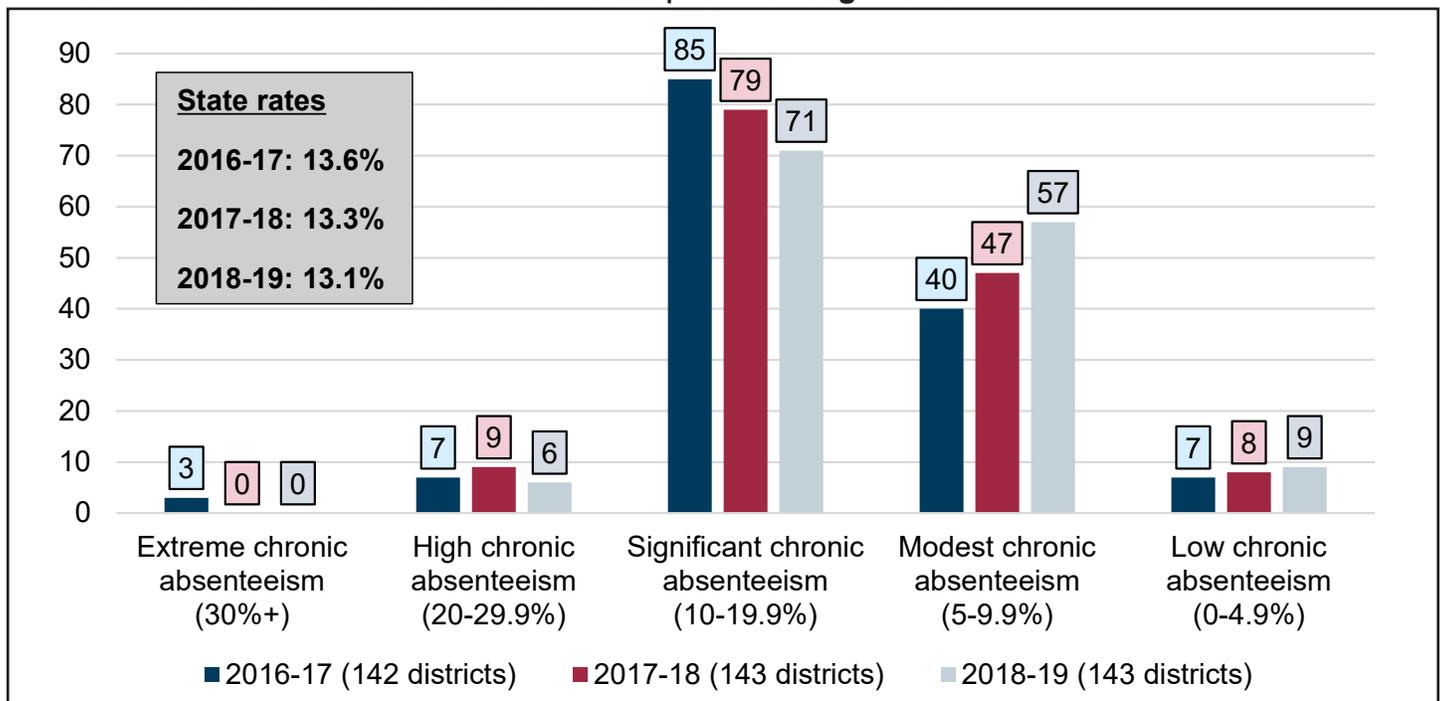
Key Points

State chronic absenteeism rates have remained steady since chronic absenteeism was first included as an accountability measure on the State Report Card in 2018.

Over the three years analyzed, state chronic absenteeism rates dropped slightly from 13.6 percent in 2017 to 13.3 percent in 2018 and finally to 13.1 percent in 2019. Chronic absenteeism rates were not calculated in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most Tennessee schools have *modest* to *significant* chronic absenteeism based on categories created by Attendance Works, a national nonprofit. Using these categories, around 670 schools had a chronic absenteeism rate in the *significant* category, with rates between 10 and 19.9 percent, from 2017 to 2019. Around 550 schools per year had *modest* chronic absenteeism rates of between 5 and 9.9 percent.

Exhibit 1: District chronic absenteeism rates | 2017 through 2019



Note: OREA used level breaks and terminology found in the Data Matters report published by Attendance Works in 2018.
Source: OREA analysis of TDOE data.

Certain student groups, including economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities, are more likely to be chronically absent than their peers.

OREA found that between 2017 and 2019, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students who were chronically absent was 20.9, as compared to 9.3 percent for students not economically disadvantaged. Students with disabilities were 1.45 times more likely to be chronically absent than students without disabilities.

Examining chronic absenteeism rates by minority group shows Black students had higher chronic absenteeism rates than either White or Hispanic students during the 2017, 2018, and 2019 school years. Hispanic students were chronically absent at a lower rate than both Black and White students.

For the three school years examined by OREA, nearly half of all chronically absent students in Tennessee were in high school. As students progress from freshman to senior year, the likelihood of chronic absenteeism increases. On average, 25 percent of high school seniors were chronically absent compared to 15 percent of freshmen.

Due to lack of data and issues of local variation, OREA was unable to conduct an evaluation of truancy rates or the effectiveness of the progressive truancy intervention plan.

While TDOE collects unexcused absence data by district, school, and student, it does not calculate truancy rates as it does for chronic absenteeism. A 2017 state law requires schools to implement a progressive truancy intervention plan, including three tiers of supports aimed at addressing the root cause of students' unexcused absences and reducing the number of truancy cases referred to juvenile court by effectively addressing the cases through the school system. There is an absence of reliable data on the implementation of the progressive truancy intervention plan in the state's districts, schools, and courts. OREA surveyed attendance supervisors, principals, and juvenile court judges across the state to gather qualitative data for the evaluation of truancy and other attendance matters.

Variation in policies and practices at the district and school levels, especially for parent notes and tardies, results in the inconsistent classification of absences as excused or unexcused across the state.

Outside of what is specified in state law, each district (and in some cases, each school) determines through its own policies whether an absence will be excused. As a result, a student might be considered truant in one district but would not be considered truant in another, complicating the implementation of truancy laws and the comparison of data.

The Comptroller's Office has included several policy options for the General Assembly in its report. These include changing requirements for data collection and calculation, clarifying aspects of the progressive truancy intervention plan, and making certain attendance-related policies more uniform for all districts, schools, and juvenile courts.

To read the report, visit the Comptroller's OREA website at tncot.cc/orea.